

A SERMON BY JOHN OWEN

(ON APRIL 3rd, 1678)

ON THE OCCASION OF AN ORDINATION.

MINISTERIAL ENDOWMENTS THE WORK OF THE SPIRIT

“But all these worketh that one and the self-same Spirit,
dividing to every man severally as he will.” (1 Cor. 12:11)

EDITED AND PUT INTO SIMPLER ENGLISH

BY

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You are a church of ancient standing, and are therefore acquainted both with the duty and practice of it. God has guided you to call *them* to office over and among you who have been long experienced in the work of the ministry; so that I am sure neither they nor you stand in any need of my instruction, as to particular duties. Therefore I shall speak a word in general on what is the foundation of all our station, work, and duty, from these words found in 1 Cor. 12:11: “But all these worketh...” There is this disadvantage in preaching upon a particular occasion, especially for one who has no more strength than I, that either we must omit insisting on the particular explication of the text, or be prevented in that which we aim at particularly from it. Both cannot be done; therefore I shall only give you the substance of the words, in that proposition which I intend to insist upon; namely —

That it is the work of the Spirit of God, in all ages of the Church, to communicate spiritual gifts and abilities to those who are called according unto his mind to the ministry of the church, to enable them unto all evangelical administrations, to his glory, and the edification of the church. Had I time, I would inquire into these two things:

1. Whether the Holy Spirit doth indeed continue to communicate *spiritual gifts*, distinct from *natural* endowments and *acquired* abilities, to the discharge of the work of the ministry, to his glory, and the edification of the church.
2. Whether these spiritual gifts and abilities, so communicated, are not the material call to the work of the ministry, previously required to the formal call to it. As to the first it is opposed by them who say that these spiritual gifts we talk of are nothing, indeed, but men's natural and acquired abilities, with an ordinary blessing of God upon their ministry; and for other spiritual gifts there are none.

As to the second, it is denied that there is, or ought to be, an outward way and order for calling men to the office of the ministry; and that a compliance therewith makes their call good, valuable, and lawful, whether they have of these gifts we talk of or no. And in these two lie all the contests about church order and worship that we have in the world.

But I shall only speak in the general unto the above proposition — namely, that it is the work of the Holy Spirit, in providing of an able ministry of the New Testament, for the use of the church to the end of the world, to communicate to them who are called according to his mind spiritual gifts and abilities, to enable them to the discharge of their duty in the administration of all ordinances, to the glory of Christ and the edification of the church. The proving of this one proposition, in which is the life of all gospel order, is all I shall do at this time.

And I shall do it in these following observations, principles, and deductions from it —

Firstly. Our Lord Jesus Christ has faithfully promised that he will be present with his Church “unto the end of the world”. (Mt. 28:20) It is his temple and habitation where he dwells, and in which he walks.” And this is that which essentially and fundamentally differentiates his church from any other assembly or society of men whatever. Let men cast themselves into what order they please, and let it be the order that they apprehend prescribed unto them in the Scripture; or let them invent a better for themselves, as they think; and let them derive their title to power and authority whence they will; if Christ is not present with them, when they have done, they are *no gospel church*. They want a foundation; and where there is no foundation, the higher they raise the building, or the more glorious they make the appearance of it, the sooner it will tumble down and come to nothing. I shall not repeat those promises of Christ’s presence now; they are known unto you: and this is the great interest of any church, to secure the promised presence of Christ with them. You have, I hope, under the conduct of the Holy Spirit of God, been guided in your choice of *such persons* as are able and faithful, to go before you in the work of the Lord: but your design ought to be, that thereby you might receive pledges of the presence of Christ with you; else all other things will be of no value. There are some who are little solicitous about these things. Do but build a house in such a frame, and say certain words, and suppose Christ is immured there; and there is a church built and made! But the observance of all outward rules and order, according to the gospel, will not constitute a church, unless Christ is taken into it. Moses built a tabernacle according to the mind of God; “according unto all that God commanded him, so did he” (Ex. 40:16) — but when he had framed it exactly, and set it up, and put every thing in its place, it was but an ordinary tabernacle, till the glory of God entered into it. And so it was with Solomon’s temple; it was but an ordinary house, until the glory of God entered into it. And suppose we could frame our church societies according to the rule of the gospel, as Moses framed the tabernacle according to the pattern showed him in the mount; they would be no churches of Christ, unless *the glory of Christ* enter into them. Here is our difference and advantage — the glory of God entered into the tabernacle and temple of old in clouds and darkness; but the glory of God enters into the gospel church, under the New Testament, in light. This is the first head — Christ has promised to be with his Church to the end and consummation of all things.

Secondly. Christ is thus present with his Church, principally and fundamentally *by his Spirit*. There are three ways in which we may speak of the presence of Christ:

1. He is everywhere *essentially* present; present with all things by the immensity of his divine nature. Christ did not promise this, for it is not a subject for a promise. The promises are of *what may be*, and not of *what cannot but be*. This presence is necessary, and cannot be otherwise; neither doth it make any alteration. It doth not make a church; it doth not make one place heaven, another hell. I speak of the immense presence of the divine nature.

2. Again, Christ is, or may be, present in his *human nature*: this was that which brought a great entanglement on the spirits of his disciples. He told them he would never leave them; and where but two or three of them were assembled in his name, he would be among them. (Mt. 18:20) At length he comes and tells them, "It is expedient for you that I go away". (Jn. 16:7) This filled their hearts with trouble; they knew not how to reconcile these things. Afterward, they were told that he was so gone from them as that they must not look for him till the day of judgement. (Acts 3:21) There must, therefore, be some other presence of Christ besides the essential presence of his divine nature, and besides the presence of his human nature; how else shall the promise be accomplished? Christ says in effect, "I will tell you what that presence is; I will send you the Holy Spirit, to supply the presence of my human nature." It is the substance of the 14th, 15th, and 16th chapters of John, to declare this truth: "I will send you the Comforter to abide with you, to enable you to all church work." Therefore, though I am with you, and have instructed you, yet you can perform no Church work at all, until the Holy Spirit comes. Abide at Jerusalem, till you have the promise of the Spirit. After the ascension of Christ, the apostles went about no church work until they had received the Holy Spirit. And Christ has no vicar except the Spirit. The truth is, the world grew weary of him, and took the work out of his hands for which he was promised; and he would have nothing to do in that which they call "the church." I need not prove this; it has been the faith of the *catholic Church* from the first foundation of it, that the promised presence of Christ with his church was *by his Spirit*. Some begin to say in our days, that Christ is no otherwise present than by the outward ordinances of it — his word and sacraments. I grant he is present with them, as pledges of his presence, and instruments wherewith, by his Spirit, he does his work effectively; but to make them the whole presence of Christ with us, I do not know what better church-state we have than the Jews, when they had the law of old.

Thirdly. This presence of the Spirit is promised and given to the Church by *an everlasting covenant*:

"As for me, this; is my covenant with them, saith the Lord; My Spirit that is upon thee, and my words which I have put in thy mouth, shall not depart out of thy mouth, nor out of the mouth of thy seed, nor out of the mouth of thy seed's seed, saith the Lord, from henceforth and for ever." (Is. 59:21)

Well, then, to whom is this promise made? It is made unto the gospel church. In the verse foregoing, "The Redeemer shall come to Zion, and unto them that turn from transgression in Jacob, saith the Lord. As for me, this is my covenant with them." With whom, then? With them the Redeemer comes to in Zion, to redeem from iniquity. What is God's covenant with them? It is his word; *his word shall be in them*. Suppose *this* promise to cease, and God doth not continue his word to any people; will not their church-state cease, which is built upon the doctrine of the prophets and apostles, which is the word of God? Yes, take away the foundation, the state must fall. God's covenant is broken with a people, where he doth not continue his word. But how is it with the "Spirit of God?" He is also promised in the same covenant. Now, suppose there be not a continuance of this promise — then I say, all covenant, relation between God and a people must be dissolved; "For this is my covenant, saith the Lord etc." — as if he had said, "If I maintain a covenant with a people, I will give them my Spirit, to abide with them for ever." That covenant whereby you are joined is dependent on this great promise; and if this be not made good, your church-state comes to an end, notwithstanding whatever outward order there may be among you. But he has given his church a covenant which "shall abide for ever."

Fourthly. It is from here that the ministry of the gospel is "the ministry of the Spirit":

“Who also has made us able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit.” (2 Cor. 3:6-8)

There were never but two ministrations, or two ministries, in the world, that were accepted of God; the one was “the ministration of the letter and of death;” the other was, and is, “the ministration of the Spirit, and of life:” and they were both glorious ministrations. That of the letter and death was glorious from its *institution*. You know what a glorious institution it had at Mount Sinai, from the manner of its performance, in a glorious sanctuary or tabernacle, and temple. And, from its *signification*, it was glorious. “But the ministration of the Spirit is much more glorious.” There never were but these two ministrations. If there be a ministration that is not a ministration of the letter and of death, nor a ministration of the Spirit and of life, it is Antichrist’s. Now, the first it cannot be: the ministration of the letter and of death is the ministration of the law; and the ministration of the gospel is the ministration of the Spirit. But say some, “It is so, because the Spirit of God has revealed all gospel dispensations; without which it had not been within the compass of the reason of man to have found them out.” But, in answer to this, the Spirit of God revealed all the ordinances and ministrations of old, from first to last, even the little additions that David made after Moses’ time. “All these things did the hand of God teach me by the Spirit.” (1 Chron. 28:12, 19) So that if it be the ministration of the Spirit, because the Spirit revealed them; so was the law the ministration of the Spirit, because the Spirit revealed that. The ministration of the Spirit must signify, either that the Spirit is the *efficient* of the ministration, or the effect of it. If the Spirit be the efficient of the ministration, then it is the Holy Spirit of God giving spiritual gifts and abilities to the ministers of the gospel, to enable them to administer all gospel ordinances to the glory of Christ and the edification of the church. Or the ministration of the Spirit may signify the communication of him, and so be the effect of the ministration. “Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?” (Gal. 3:2) — that is, “Received ye the Spirit by the law, or by the gospel?” Then this proposition follows: that so long as there is the preaching of the gospel, there is the communication of the Spirit. Take it whatever you will, it is sufficient for my end. If you take the Spirit to be the efficient of the ministration of the church, enabling its ministers to perform their work, or for the effect of the ministration — he is to abide with the church for ever. For the clearing of this, which is the hinge on which all gospel order turns, we have got so far — that Christ has promised the Spirit to be with the church; that it is neither the essential presence of his divine or human nature in particular; and that the Spirit is promised to be with the church by an everlasting and unchangeable covenant: from whence it is the gospel is the ministration of the Spirit and of life, and not of death.

Fifthly. Let us consider *the general end* why the Spirit is thus, promised unto the church. God has promised unto Jesus Christ, that he shall have a kingdom and church in the world while the sun and moon endure. “His name shall endure for ever: his name shall be continued as long as the sun” (Ps. 77:17) — that is, to the end of the world. In Is. 9:7, it is said, “Of the increase of his government” (or church) “there shall be no end” — he shall order it for ever. “Upon this rock I will build my church” Mt. 16:18 — that is, upon himself, — “and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” Now, this promise Christ requires that we should mix with faith; which we cannot do, unless there is some ground for the infallible accomplishment of it. Whereon, then, doth depend the certain accomplishment of this great promise that God has made unto Jesus Christ, concerning which we have as much reason to have our faith exercised at this day as ever? It must depend on some work of God or man. Suppose it depends on *some work of man* — that is, upon the steadiness of the will of man in yielding obedience unto Jesus Christ, and so continuing his church and kingdom in the world, leaving the ordering of the things of the church according to God’s institution of it — and maintain, withal, that God doth not by effectual grace determine the will of man to obedience; and then God himself can only conjecture.

Nor does this lay any ground for us to mix it with faith; but rather faith will depend on men's doing their duty in the world: which, indeed, can be no real ground of faith; for what happens in one place, in the same circumstances of things, may fall out in another: and we know some places where the gospel has been embraced, and afterward has come to nothing. Therefore, certainly, the accomplishment of this promise must depend upon *the work of God*. If you ask, "What work of God that is whereon the certainty of this promise doth depend?" I say, It is this work, and no other, of sending the Holy Spirit.

There are but two things to be considered therein, — its internal form, and its external form. Its *internal* form is union to Jesus Christ by saving grace; its *external* form and constitution is according to the law of the gospel, and its power: and this cannot be continued without the continued ministration of the Spirit of God in and with his church. To suppose the internal form, (that we may have union with Christ, through saving grace) without the effectual work of the Spirit, is at once to blot out all. Therefore, if God should cease to communicate the Spirit, as to an internal, saving work upon the hearts of the elect, the church would cease as to its internal form. No church would have a relation unto Jesus Christ as the mystical head, if God should cease to communicate the Spirit as to gifts. For the outward administration and form of the church, whatever order you bring into it, cannot be accounted a church of Christ, unless there be the presence of Christ in it. And no one can make confession "that Jesus Christ is the Lord, but by the Holy Spirit". (1 Cor. 12:3) You can make no profession, continue no dispensation of ordinances, or anything that is acceptable to God, without the Holy Spirit. The sum of all you do this day is, your acknowledging Jesus Christ to be the Lord — that you are in subjection unto his authority, that you are in the observation of his appointments, and that you recommend your consciences unto him who is "your Lord and your God." But you must have the Spirit of God and his presence, in order to this. The Holy Spirit is promised and given for the continuance and preservation of a church here below, and therein for the accomplishment of this promise which God has made to us, to continue with the Church to the end of all things. And *if he should cease* as to either of his operations — either in working internal saving grace, or spiritual abilities for gospel administrations — *the church must cease*, both in the internal and external form and power of it.

Having laid this foundation, I come, in the next place —

Sixthly. To some particular *proof* of the proposition — namely, that the Holy Spirit thus promised, thus sent, thus given, doth furnish the ministers of the gospel, according to his mind, with spiritual abilities in the discharge of their work; and without it they are no way fitted for nor able to it — no way accepted with Christ in what they do, nor can give any faithful account of what they undertake. It is that which the Lord Jesus Christ intends to declare unto us. (Mt. 25:14-30) You have an account there given of the continuance of the church, the kingdom of Christ, in the world to the end of it. The great Lord is gone away, and intends to return again at the end of the world; in the meantime, he has appointed servants to take care of the administration of the affairs of his house and kingdom: and for this end he gives them talents that they may trade with. He gives them variously, as he pleases — to one, five; to another, two; and to another, but one; and he provides work for all their talents. Some men have grown so rich in the world that they care not to employ their stock; but it must not be so with us. We shall have trade for all our talents. None have so little but they may trade. He that had but one might have traded, as well as he that had five; and been as well accepted. It is agreed by all, that they are spiritual abilities that Christ gives his servants to trade with in the administration of gospel ordinances. And these three things are plainly held forth in the parable:

1. That wherever Jesus Christ calls and appoints a minister in his house, for the building work of it, he gives him spiritual abilities to do that work by the Holy Spirit. He set none at work in his house, when he went away, but he gave them talents.

2. For men to take upon them to serve Christ as officers in the work of his house, who have received none of these spiritual abilities to work with, is a high presumption, and casts reflection of dishonour on Jesus Christ; as if he called to work and gave no strength; as though he called to trade, and gave no stock; or required spiritual duties, and gave no spiritual abilities. Christ will say to such at the last day, "How came ye in hither?"

3. This is plain in the parable, also, that those who have received talents, or spiritual gifts and abilities of the Holy Spirit, they are to trade with them. And I do not know a warning that I judge more necessary to be given those who are called this day, than to charge them not to trade too much with their natural gifts, and abilities, and learning. These are talents in their kind; but it is the Spirit must manage all that learning they have, or it will prejudice them and you also. *I have known some good men have been so addicted to their study, that they have thought the last day of the week sufficient to prepare for their ministry, though they employ all the rest of the week in other studies.* But your great business is to trade with your *spiritual* abilities.

There is another testimony to be added to this (to name one or two among many) in Romans 12:4-8:

"For as we have many members one body, and all members have not the same office; so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another. Having then gifts, differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith; or ministry, let us wait on our ministering; or he that teacheth, on teaching; or he that exhorteth, on exhortation..."

It is not to my present concern whether offices or duties are intended in this place; but three things are plain to me in this text —

1. That this discourse and direction doth concern the ordinary state of the church in all ages. I profess to you I had rather a thousand times be of their opinion, bad as it is, who say that all church-state is ceased, than that there may be a church-state when these gifts and graces are not. If I did not see these graces and gifts continued to some, to keep up the ordinances of the church in some measure, I should believe it had ceased.

2. That gifts are the foundation of all church work, whether it be in office or out of office. "Having therefore gifts, let us", says the apostle, do so and so. If there are no spiritual gifts, there is no spiritual work. Spiritual gifts are the foundation of office, which is the foundation of work in the Church, and of all gospel administrations in a special manner, according to the gifts received. Truly, it may be you may think it lost labour to prove this; but there is nothing more despised or reproached in this world than this one apprehension, that there are spiritual gifts given unto persons, to enable them to perform all gospel administrations.

3. That not only the discharge of duty and work depends on the administration of gifts, but the measure of work depends upon the measure of gifts; it is according to the measure every one has received: and there are many *measures*. As long as there is any measure of spiritual gifts, let it not be despised among you. The gifts of the Holy Spirit are not only

for work, but, I say, for the measure of work. (Eph. 4:8-13) All these spiritual gifts the Holy Spirit bestows to enable pastors to perform their work.

Seventhly. As *spiritual gifts* are bestowed unto this end, so they are *necessary* for it. There can be no gospel administration without spiritual gifts; the ministration of the gospel being the ministration of the Spirit, and all gospel ministrations are spiritual ministrations. The truth is, one reason why they are called so, and are so, is, because they are no way to be administered to the glory of Christ but by the aid and help of these spiritual gifts. If the Lord Jesus Christ had appointed carnal ordinances, such as are suited to the reason and strength of a man, there had been no need for him to promise the assistance of the Spirit. The spirit of a man knows the things of a man. (1 Cor. 2:11) All the things within the compass of a man, the spirit of a man will find them out, and give strength for the performance of them. Christ says in Jn. 6:63: “My words, they are spirit,’ and all my offices and ordinances are spiritual” — and thus there is a necessity of spiritual gifts for their administration: so that *spiritual gifts and spiritual administrations live and die together*. And the way whereby the world lost the spiritual ministrations of the gospel, was by the neglect and contempt of spiritual gifts; whereby alone they can be performed. This was the ground of the apostasy of the primitive church — they grew weary of spiritual ministrations. It is the most difficult and laborious ministry. Men’s hearts became carnal and grew weary of spiritual things; they did not care to wait upon Christ for supplies of grace and the gifts of the Spirit; for these gifts are not grace, and in truth will flourish long in no other soil but where there is grace. As we should not have such a product of sin were it not for original corruption, whence it grows; so flourishing gifts will not long grow but in *the soil of the Spirit*. How many persons with gifts have flourished for a while, and then have withered, because they were planted in no good soil! It will be drudgery, for any man to keep up spiritual gifts where they have not spiritual soil to grow in. The world grew weary of gospel ministrations, and would not keep up *that way*. What then? They found out imaginations suited to their inclinations; they will have prayer-books to read, ceremonies to perform, and a number of inventions to keep up a form of worship without those spiritual gifts. We have an instance in the church of Rome. What various extravagant things they have done to make an outward show, when they had lost spiritual gifts! All forms of worship are nothing but to keep an outward appearance. They did not like to retain these gifts in their minds, whereby alone spiritual worship is to be administered. The principle of the apostasy of all churches in the world is, from a weariness of serving God by the aid and assistance of the Spirit.

Eighthly. That there is a communication of spiritual gifts in gospel ordinances, we plead *experience*. We know how this is derided by profane scoffers; but we plead the experience of those who are humble and holy, and have a spiritual acquaintance with these things. I hope I may plead against the world the experience of this congregation. Have you had no experience of those ministrations? Have you never found in the administrations of those whom God has called to go before you, evidences of the presence of Christ by his Spirit, in the communication of gifts to them, to make them effectual to your edification and consolation? Have you not had a *proof of the Spirit of Christ speaking in them?* (2 Cor. 13:3)

It is intolerable presumption for men to think of carrying on gospel administrations without the supplies of the Spirit; as you who are God’s people can testify. And there is no congregation of Christ but can bear testimony to it, that “the Spirit divides to every man as he will” — gives out as he pleases of his assistance. Let men, therefore, pretend never so much that they are able to be ministers of the New Testament, without any of those aids and assistances whereof we have been discoursing; let them please themselves with the applause they may receive from persons unacquainted with the mystery and glory of

these things; let them despise and condemn whatever is testified to the contrary — it is certain, where the gifts of the Spirit of God, as to the gospel ministrations of the church, are lost or neglected, Christ is so also, the Spirit of God is so also, and all the benefits of the gospel will be so too.

I have but one word to add, and that is of *exhortation*, to those whom Christ has called to the work of the ministry, and whom you have called this day. I told you, at the beginning, I would not give them *instruction* — but I may give them a word of *exhortation*; and that is, to attend unto the ministry whereunto God has called them upon this foundation. And there are three motives I shall give them for the work —

First. It is *the most difficult ministration* of any that one can be called to — as it is great, so it is difficult. Any way of administration is easy in comparison of this of spiritual gifts; easy to flesh and blood. What an easy ministration, with all their altars and services, has the church of Rome provided for their ministers! So to read, and so to sing, come as they will, prepared or not prepared, having hearts and minds filled with what they will — this is a ministry for them easier than any trade; and in this their natural endowments and abilities are employed. But if we intend the ministers by the gifts received from the Holy Spirit, the matter and root wherein alone they will grow must be carefully preserved. If grace decays in our hearts, a ministry in gifts will grow burdensome and displeasing to ourselves, as well as useless to the congregation. We must look well unto the soil, or it will be of no advantage that we have this ministry committed to us. It is required there be no un-useful ministers. Hand and heart must be always filled with the work: “Meditate on these things”. (1 Tim. 4:15) If you have undertaken the work of the ministry, you must be meditating on it. Unless you are in these things continually, you will not make faithful dispensers of the word. A man may preach a very good sermon, who is otherwise himself; but he will never make *a good minister of Jesus Christ*, whose heart and mind is not always in the work. Spiritual gifts will require continual ruminating on the things of the gospel in our minds; which makes it a difficult ministry, when our hearts and minds may be cast into the mould and form of those things which we are to deliver to others. And it is surprising how a little necessary diversion will unfit the mind for this work.

Secondly. As it is a very difficult work to carry on to a right improvement of it, so it is a *glorious work*, let the world deride it as they will. The great design of the Apostle, as we see in 2 Cor. 3, is to show it is much more glorious than the old ministration was. Really, that was a very glorious ministration; but this ministry that is committed to us has more glory in it, being “the ministration of the Spirit” by which souls are converted by the power of grace, and holy converse with God is kept up. It is much more glorious than beholding the high priest in Solomon’s temple; being under the eye of the holy God, who is judge of these ministerial gifts: therefore do not divert from them by any means.

Thirdly. It is the *only* ministry that is indeed effective in the edification and building up of the church. (Eph. 4:8, etc.) This is the great end for which gospel ministers are appointed — “Till all are brought”, by their ministry, “to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” May the Lord prosper it in your hands!

Give me leave to speak one word to you who are *the Church* — Know what you are to do, in reference unto those you have called and made officers this day. Pray unto God for a fresh communication of gifts unto them — they are capable of it. It is a renewed act of grace that prepares and opens the soul for receiving new communications of God’s grace, for the administration of the holy things of Christ in the congregation. Pray much for them to that end and purpose.

